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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version  
Arbeitspapier / working paper

#### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Freitag, U. (2013). *Researching "Muslim Worlds": regions and disciplines*. (ZMO Programmatic Texts, 6). Berlin: Zentrum Moderner Orient. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:101:1-201511032603>

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# Researching »Muslim Worlds«: regions and disciplines

Ulrike Freitag<sup>1</sup>

This programmatic paper addresses some of the challenges facing researchers who are trying to work on wider issues pertaining to the study of the different worlds in which Muslims live. It looks at the trajectories of various area studies and disciplines, and at the often competing conceptual premises which more often than not arise from the differing disciplinary traditions. In addition, different national scholarly traditions (i.e. between the Anglo-, Arabo-, Franco- and Germanophone world, to name but a few) further increase the difficulties of meaningful communication and overarching analysis. The paper describes and illustrates these difficulties. It also suggests a number of ways to mitigate (if not entirely overcome) such problems, which also underly the present attempt at a wider conceptualisation of studying »Muslim Worlds – World of Islam?«, which is the aim of the ZMO research programme 2008–2019.

## »Muslim Worlds« and Islam

Before approaching some of the methodological and practical problems, a major conceptual task is at hand: What do we mean by »Muslim Worlds«, and why this particular category? The plural is a conscious choice, pointing to the empirical fact that, while Islam is a religion based on the Koran, which is recognised by all of its adherents, Muslims nevertheless live in many different worlds, in terms of their understanding of what the religion

means as well as in terms of their lifeworlds. The investigation of these worlds, is at the centre of the present enquiry.

In geographic terms, a closer consideration reveals that we are dealing with two distinct categorical approaches: The first, and perhaps more conventional one, at least if one looks at wider area studies beyond Islamic studies, is regional or, more precisely, transregional, whereas the second one is based on the identification of certain people as Muslims, who are then considered to be the subject of enquiry.

To start with the transregional notion of what is commonly seen as »the World of Islam«: it is based on the empirical observation that a number of regions in Asia, the Middle East, Africa and South-eastern Europe have Muslim majority populations. Marshall Hodgson has argued that the spread of Islam between the 7th and the 18th century moulded these regions into what he calls the »Islamicate World«.<sup>2</sup> By this, Hodgson meant the establishment of Muslim political rule, and cultural influence, over parts of Asia and Africa, without, however, referring exclusively to Muslims and Islam as a belief system. Rather he argues that a joint set of cultural practices developed which, although grounded in Islam, encompassed also the non-Muslim populations of these regions. Besides political rule, the emergence of transnational networks of trade and learning, which, of course, varied greatly over time, need to be mentioned as contributing crucially to this joint culture which did not, however, erase the continuity of significant local variations. Thus, a study of the »Islamicate World« almost by necessity privileges a focus on what,

<sup>1</sup> This programmatic paper results from intense discussions with, and the integration of, a large number of suggestions and comments by colleagues from ZMO notably between 2010 and 2012. Without their significant contributions, the paper would have a very different form. I also owe a debt of gratitude to Philipp Dehne for his comments and help in locating the materials used.

<sup>2</sup> Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Chicago 1974, 57–60.

for want of a better expression, might be termed South-South relations. As such, this contributes to the kind of decentering of the West from historical and political narratives which has been one of the demands connected to a rethinking of history and social sciences.<sup>3</sup>

At the core of this »Islamicate World« was a somewhat more tightly, religiously based ideational system, which John Voll, referring to Wallerstein's economically based world system theory, has termed an »Islamic World System« and to which Muslims would refer as the »umma« or community of believers.<sup>4</sup> This essentially religious bias notwithstanding, this system was at times also based on political and economic dominance of Muslim empires, but it continued to expand even after the political hegemony of Muslim empires in large parts of Asia and Africa was challenged by the rise of Western empires.<sup>5</sup> It would be interesting to compare and contrast this »Islamic World System« to the ways in which Catholicism was constructed during the European Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup>

Nowadays, this »world system« also includes Muslim diasporas in the West, who can feel part of a »universalizing global culture«<sup>7</sup>. Given that Muslim members of migrant communities in non-Muslim societies today can choose much more than their 18th or 19th century predecessors to be both members of their host communities and of their communities of origin, due to the new modes of speedy and real-time communication, and be involved in global exchanges via electronic media, the inclusion of these groups in a study of »Muslim Worlds« clearly is called for. Thus, we are dealing here with a second, distinct but related, category. It is based on the adherence – however defined – to

a belief system. This may lead to categorial confusions: In the first instance, we are dealing with a geographical area defined on grounds of cultural history and inclusive of large population segments which might have been influenced by Islamic culture, but not adhered to Islam as a religion, whereas in the second instance of Muslim diasporas, we are focussing on Muslims, even if they may have hugely varying positions regarding their religion and, indeed, religiosity.<sup>8</sup>

Obviously, this imbalance, which might be expressed in terms of the investigation of Muslim majority or minority societies, does not by itself impede concrete research, and can be mitigated by the questions guiding individual enquiries. It raises the question of the extent Islam is the one or at least a major defining factor in the life of communities and societies, which must clearly be answered differently according to the periods and places as well as the phenomena we are considering. In order to avoid the pitfall of the scientist finding what he or she is looking for, it is imperative to pay particular attention to context and historicity on the one hand, which might well imply a specific attention to interactions outside »Muslim Worlds«, and to comparison with other contexts from both within and without »Muslim Worlds« on the other.<sup>9</sup>

One example for this could be what has been called the »Hadhrami awakening« in Southeast Asia, namely the emergence of cultural (including religious), social and political awareness of Arab migrants to the region in the colonial context of the early 20th century. While historians focussed on the Middle East and/or Islamic Studies might easily attribute this to developments and debates within the Middle East, and refer to the circulation of notably the journal *al-Manār* in Southeast Asia, Mobini-Kesheh has convincingly shown that Chinese reformist influences, which had arrived in Java in the early 20th century, also played a major role in shaping the form of this revival.<sup>10</sup> In an even wider perspective, global trends of cultural renewal in specific forms can be discerned, notably for the period since the late 19th century, within which the specific »awakening« must be situated. Such an

3 A prominent example which sparked much debate is Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton, Oxford 2008 (reissue), cf. Natalie Zemon Davis, »Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World«, *History and Theory* 50:2 (2011), 188–202.

4 I will not discuss the vexed question of how to define religion, on this see Giovanni Filoramo, *Che cos'è la religione. Temi metodici problemi*, Torino 2004, 75–127.

5 John Obert Voll, »Islam as a Special World-System«, *Journal of World History* 5:2 (1994), 213–226, Janet Abu Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System, A.D. 1250–1350*, New York 1989, Richard M. Eaton, »Islamic History as Global History«, in Michael Adas (ed.), *Islamic & European Expansion. The Forging of a Global Order*, Philadelphia 1993, 1–36; Leif Manger (ed.), *Muslim Diversity: Local Islam in a Global Context*, Abingdon 1999.

6 E.g. Felicitas Schmieder, »Von der ›Christianitas‹ nach ›Europa‹«, in Angela Schottenhammer, Peter Feldbauer (eds.), *Die Welt 1000–1250*, Wien 2011, 213–238 and Bernd Hausberger, »Das Reich, in dem die Sonne nicht unterging. Die iberische Welt«, in Peter Feldbauer, Jean-Paul Lehnens (eds.), *Die Welt im 16. Jahrhundert*, Wien 2008, 335–372.

7 Leif Manger, *The Hadrami Diaspora: Community-building on the Indian Ocean Rim*, New York/Oxford 2010, 13, c.f. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, Minneapolis/London 1996, 22.

8 Hodgson's choice of the term »Islamdom« does not, to my mind, solve the problems of this distinction, as it also involves the double meaning of adherents of a religion and/or Muslim majority countries, at least if taken in analogy to Christendom.

9 Cf. in anthropology Andre Gingrich, Richard G. Fox, *Anthropology, by Comparison*, London 2010, Introduction by the editors, 1–26, and notably the chapters by Peacock, Melhuus and Gingrich, and for history Margrit Pernau, *Transnationale Geschichte*, Göttingen 2011, notably 36–84.

10 William R. Roff, *The Origins of Malay Nationalism*, 2nd ed., Kuala Lumpur etc. 1994, Natalie Mobini-Kesheh, *The Hadhrami Awakening: Community and Identity in the Netherlands East Indies, 1900–1942*, Ithaca 1999 and Ulrike Freitag, *Indian Ocean Migrants and State Formation in Hadhramaut*, Leiden 2003.

approach which has global developments in mind allows for the distinction of multiple scales, between certain emergent universal forms of social organisation and expression, in this case (i.e. associations and the press) and culturally and contextually specific expressions of identity and social models, without falling into the pitfalls of models of cultural homogeneity.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, it seems useful to consider Islam not necessarily in strictly religious terms. Thus, a major factor in the Islamisation of many cities of the Indian Ocean rim, which were commercial hubs, seems to have been the advantages of Islamic (commercial) Law. Consequently, it makes sense to »take a more fuzzy and open-ended view of it [that is, of Islam] as a grand scheme that is actively imagined and debated by people and that can offer various kinds of direction, meaning and guidance in people's lives.« Furthermore, such a perspective has to consider the connections of this »grand scheme« or worldview both to »everyday concerns and experiences; and second, in their relation to other compelling grand schemes that also promise to provide meaning and direction to those everyday concerns and experiences.«<sup>12</sup>

Such an approach cannot and should not be limited to phenomena which are likely to yield results about the »Islamicity« of certain groups or cultural phenomena. It might well turn out that certain individuals or groups, albeit stemming from »Muslim Worlds« as defined above, consider Islam to be utterly irrelevant to their concerns or lives, and will need to be framed quite differently in order to do them justice in biographies, for example. Yet others, such as many Central Asian Muslims, might (re)discover their Islamic heritage after it had become irrelevant or had lain dormant for some time.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, the experience of different social worlds, some of which might be linked to »Islam« and others not, as well as the different ascriptions of identity form part of the richly textured lifeworlds of Muslims and non-Muslims. Nevertheless, these experiences form as much part of life in Islamicate contexts as elsewhere, and are therefore significant in the context of a wider enquiry into »Muslim Worlds«.

**11** For examples of how such a perspective can be developed see the contributions in Sebastian Conrad, Dominic Sachsenmaier (eds.), *Competing Visions of World Order. Global Moments and Movements, 1880s-1930s*, New York 2007.

**12** Samuli Schielke, »Second thoughts about the anthropology of Islam, or how to make sense of grand schemes in everyday life«, *ZMO Working Papers* 2 (2010), 14 (<http://d-nb.info/1009590987/34/>, access 25.8.2011), Bruce Lawrence, »Afterword«, in Carl W. Ernst, Richard C. Martin (eds.), *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*, Columbia S.C. 2010, 302-323.

**13** Bakhtijar Babadžanov, Aširbek Muminov, Anke von Kügelgen, *Disputy musul'manskich religioznych avtoritetov v Central'noy Azii*, Almaty 2007.

## The study of »Muslim Worlds«: a study of »the other«?

It is a well-known and much debated fact that the study of foreign cultures, albeit long part of a variety of fields of knowledge, was boosted in the Western Age of Enlightenment. It took on a new form in the 19th century, not only because of the changing interests in such knowledge (notably the European exploration of and rule over vast sways of the world), but also because of the establishment of the modern university system within which a range of increasingly specialised disciplines was canonised until the 20th century. In many ways, this is an ongoing and dynamic process.<sup>14</sup> In a complex mixture of conscious adaptation, which formed part of the process of modernisation, and of simple importation and/or imposition, both the Western understanding of science and its organisation in universities was spread worldwide, a process that took well into the 20th century to be established, often in conjunction with processes of decolonisation, and which can, to some extent, still be seen to be ongoing.<sup>15</sup> The current worldwide process of the liberalisation of higher learning and research, which is particularly marked in formerly very controlled contexts such as the former Soviet Union or the Arab world, and which involves significant funding initiatives, has raised pertinent questions about the relationship of »knowledge, power and capital at the global level«.<sup>16</sup>

Historically, the Western curiosity about matters non-Western, and its successful establishment in a scientific context, has been contrasted with Muslim societies who only »awoke« in the 19th century to the need not only to learn about others but also to the increasing expansion of Western political power and – in time – the export of the Western secular system of accumulating, organising and disseminating knowledge.<sup>17</sup> Apart from the only limited veracity of this view in terms of a lack

**14** On the interest in non-Western cultures in the Age of Enlightenment, see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Entzauberung Asiens. Europa und die asiatischen Reiche im 18. Jahrhundert*, München 1998, 15-37.

**15** For a concise overview in a global history perspective, see Jürgen Osterhammel, *Die Verwandlung der Welt. Eine Geschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts*, München 2009, 1105-1171, more specifically about the humanities and social sciences in their relation to »the other« from 1155. A plea to enlarge the world's scientific knowledge base can be found in Susantha Goonatilake, *Toward a Global Science. Mining Civilizational Knowledge*, Bloomington 1998.

**16** Sarah Amsler, *The Politics of Knowledge in Central Asia. Science between Marx and the Market*, Basingstoke 2007, xi, 4-8, on the relationship between funding and knowledge cf. *daz Akademie* 07/11, Thema: Stiftungslehrstühle.

**17** A still impressive, albeit somewhat dated and in some of its conclusions highly controversial exposition of this process is Bernard Lewis, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, London 1994 (1982), for a substantial criticism of some of Lewis' assumptions see the review by Richard Bulliet in *American Historical Review* 88:2 (1983), 439f.

of interest by Muslims in the world surrounding them, one can discern fairly early voices cognisant of Western positions and responding to them. This developed, since the late 19th century, into a veritable and increasing chorus from the societies thus observed. The initial aim was to defend basic tenets of faith or local culture against what was seen as an imperialist onslaught. As a prominent example, the pan-Islamic writer and activist Jamal al-Din al-Afghani comes to mind, who challenged the French philosopher and writer Ernest Renan's views on Islam in Paris in 1883.<sup>18</sup> Later, the more systematic criticism of the discursive systems in which Western scholarship was embedded came to be associated with the term »Orientalism«, the title of Edward Said's iconic study which sparked a lengthy debate branching far beyond the more narrow field of Oriental and Islamic Studies into enquiries including various regional and disciplinary fields of study, as well as the arts.<sup>19</sup>

One of the major criticisms of »Orientalism« had been the fact that it was usually Westerners, or at least individuals completely absorbed in and integrated into the Western system of knowledge production who studied non-Western societies. The dramatic increase in transnational migrations has, albeit in locally starkly varying ways, to some extent changed this landscape. Subaltern and post-colonial studies, indeed Edward Said himself, may be a good example of an increasing fusion of perspectives by academics of different backgrounds. This notwithstanding, there remain real challenges of hegemony and hierarchy in academia and beyond, which have raised questions pertaining to the epistemological bases of knowledge, its status in different contexts as well as the uses to which it is being put.<sup>20</sup>

In addition, and as mentioned above, the academic study of non-Western societies has for some time now been no longer the exclusive domain of Western scholars. What has this meant for traditions of knowledge and learning which did not fit the Western model? Obviously, and to some extent comparable to structural developments in the

west, the process of scientification and the institutionalisation of knowledge did not mean their immediate disappearance. Depending on the content, as well as on the regional context, they live on, but are often relegated to fields such as folklore or literature, and thus are (from the academic perspective) to the lesser field of non-academic knowledge which might become itself a field for study.<sup>21</sup> In the case of history, this meant that, next to often decidedly national historical traditions which were furthered in the context of the establishment of nation states in Asia and Africa, older traditions of local history writing and transmission by poetry and in other forms were kept and sometimes continued in a modernised form.<sup>22</sup> A particularly interesting transformation happened in the case of the study of Islam as a religious system, since it was partly adapted to the modern university system and partly continued to be transmitted in madrasas, mosques and study circles. However, Ousmane Kane has shown convincingly for sub-Saharan intellectual history how theoreticians of the sociology of knowledge hardly communicate with those cognisant of the Islamic intellectual tradition of this region, quite independent of the type of education the latter have had. He ascribes this in part to disciplinary, in part to linguistic reasons. This has had an immense impact on how sub-Saharan African intellectual history has been understood to date.<sup>23</sup> This find can be translated to other regions and topics.

### Can the internationalisation of academia resolve the problems?

The aforementioned broadening base of those who study non-Western societies has not and may not be able to resolve all the problems addressed by the critique of Orientalism, since the central issue of the »situatedness of knowledge« remains. Its discussion in the following paragraphs identifies some of the underlying structural reasons

<sup>18</sup> Nikkie R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism, Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din al-Afghani*, Berkeley 1983.

<sup>19</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London 1979. A recent review of many of the debates can be found in Burkhard Schnepel, Gunnar Brands, Hanne Schöning (eds.), *Orient – Orientalistik – Orientalismus, Geschichte und Aktualität einer Debatte*, Bielefeld 2011, many important texts are assembled in A.L Macfie, *Orientalism. A Reader*, Edinburgh 2000, for a discussion of the further development of Orientalism see Edmund Burke III and David Prochaska, »Introduction: Orientalism from Postcolonial Theory to World History«, in Id. (eds.), *Genealogies of Orientalism: History, Theory, Politics*, Lincoln/London 2008, 1-71.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, New York 1994, 50-61, Hamid Dabashi, *Brown Skin White Masks*, London, New York 2011, Amsler, *The Politics of Knowledge*.

<sup>21</sup> Thus, the study of »fulklür« became a fertile field of academic enquiry in Egypt. Katharina Lange, »Zurückholen, was uns gehört.« *Indigenisierungstendenzen in der arabischen Ethnologie*, Bielefeld 2005, 53-56.

<sup>22</sup> For Syria, this has been discussed by Ulrike Freitag, *Geschichtsschreibung in Syrien 1920-1990*, Hamburg 1991, for Jordan, see Andrew Shryock, *Nationalism and the Genealogical Imagination. Oral History and Textual Authority in Tribal Jordan*, Berkeley 1997, for India Georg Berkemer, »Banausia and Endo-history: European Conceptions of Indian Historical Consciousness«, Internet publication series on South Asian history 3 (2007), <http://archiv.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/savifadok/volltexte/2007/41/>, for East Africa see Thomas Geider, »Die Schönheit der Kokospalme: Sheikh Nabhanys zweites Dokumentargedicht in einem Swahili-Schulbuch«, *Afrika und Übersee* 75 (1992), 161-190 and Gudrun Mieke, Katrin Bromber, Said Khamis, Ralf Groperhode (eds.), *Kala Shairi. German East Africa in Swahili Poems*, Köln 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Ousmane Kane, *Intellectuels non europaïques*, Dakar (CODESRIA) 2003, 55.



and points to some of the epistemological issues involved. Much of this can be linked to the multiple ways in which academic knowledge is situated.<sup>24</sup>

### *The situatedness of scholars and of knowledge production*

Some of these problems are linked to the still prevailing national organisation of knowledge, which may or may not be linked to the (predominant) use of specific national languages for the production, and even more so, the dissemination of this knowledge. This is particularly true for the humanities and social sciences, which are very closely linked to questions such as national identity and the generation of nationally useful knowledge (i.e. in sociology or history).<sup>25</sup> In the study of non-Western contexts such as »Muslim Worlds«, the construction of the »other« was an important factor in the development of one's own self-image and thus also linked to the national self-image, as is, indeed, the study of the Muslim »other« within Western societies. Thus, the different histories of Western powers with and in non-Western worlds often powerfully shape the agenda, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly and notwithstanding individual researchers' orientations, while the gaze at the Muslim other inside Western states is very much influenced by the different ways in which nation-states are construed. This transpires already on the surface, where one can observe specific regional orientations which can be traced back to imperial links, such as those between The Netherlands and Indonesia, Britain and India, Russia and Central Asia or France and the Maghreb. C.H. Becker's investigations into Islam in East Africa fall into the same fold of trying to understand Islam in order to ease German colonial rule.<sup>26</sup> However, this conscious or unconscious agenda-setting also influences the kinds of topics on which debates in particular (national or

regional) contexts are focussed. Thus, the German tradition of Islamic Studies has been deeply influenced by the original interest in theological issues in Germany (with notable exceptions such as Becker, as shown above), whereas the emergence of anthropological approaches in France and Britain can be seen in the context of the generation of colonial knowledge. Incidentally, such a reflection on the origins of national traditions of the study of »Muslim Worlds« also helps to deconstruct the notion of a kind of unified »Western interest« or »Western knowledge« of »the« Muslim World.

Another interesting divide is the one between Western and Soviet – and to some extent Eastern European – approaches, most pertinent, perhaps, in the those fields of »Oriental Studies« which dealt with the Muslims within the Soviet Union.<sup>27</sup> Thus, Soviet Oriental Studies were characterised, from the beginning, by the integration of scholars from the regions who came into leading positions.<sup>28</sup> After Islam had been situated within a Marxist-Leninist approach as a feudal religion, the struggle against Islamic tradition took shape. Using the argument of the group Ahl al-Hadith about a pure Islam, they struggled against what they considered to be »harmful« or »backward« traditions.<sup>29</sup> In general, and far beyond Central Asia, an increasing Arabocentrism with regard to the definition of matters »Islamic« can be noted over the past decades, which might extend beyond mere theological debates and can also be linked to hegemonic struggles. In a more global perspective, this has sometimes obscured profound differences between (and of course within) different Arab Muslim states.<sup>30</sup> Interestingly, the field of Islamic Studies in the West to some extent mirrors this Arabocentrism among many Muslim scholars by still privileging Arabic, and the study of Arabic texts on the basis of the same argument used by Muslim scholars, namely the importance of the language of the Koran.

Furthermore, much scholarship on Islam and Muslim societies has developed among scholars who identify themselves as Muslims, and once

24 Cf. Burke, Prochaska, »Introduction«, 18, the idea is already found in Reinhart Koselleck, »Standortbindung und Zeitlichkeit. Ein Beitrag zur historiographischen Erschließung der geschichtlichen Welt«, in Wolfgang J. Mommsen, Jörn Rüsen (eds.), *Theorie der Geschichte. Beiträge zur Historik*, vol. 1, Munich 1997, 17–46.

25 On the problems arising from this division of labour for sociology see Ulrich Beck, »Cosmopolitical Realism: On the Distinction between Cosmopolitanism in Philosophy and the Social Sciences«, *Global Networks* 4:2 (2004), 131–156; for history, see Pernau, *Transnationale Geschichte*, 7–19. However, it needs to be pointed out that there have been always broader approaches, see the critique of Beck and others in Daniel Chernilo, *Sociology and the Nation State: Beyond Methodological Nationalism*, PhD thesis, Univ. of Warwick 2004 ([http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/3656/1/WRAP\\_THESIS\\_Chernilo\\_2004.pdf](http://wrap.warwick.ac.uk/3656/1/WRAP_THESIS_Chernilo_2004.pdf), access 25.8.2011).

26 C.H. Becker, »Materialien zur Kenntnis des Islam in Deutsch-Ostafrika«, *Der Islam*, ii (1911), 1–48. The article was translated into English by B.G. Martin as »Materials for the Understanding of Islam in German East Africa«, *Tanzania Notes and Records* 68 (1968), 31–61.

27 Michael Kemper, »Introduction: Integrating Soviet Oriental Studies«, in Michael Kemper, Stephan Conermann (eds.), *The Heritage of Soviet Oriental Studies*, Routledge 2011, 1–26.

28 This became known as the politics of »korenizatsiia« (enrooting), cf. Kemper, »Introduction«.

29 For a discussion of this issue, see Ashirbek Muminov, Uvgun Gafurov, Rinat Shigabdinov, »Islamic education in Soviet and post-Soviet Uzbekistan«, in Michael Kemper, Raoul Motika, Stefan Reichmuth (eds.), *Islamic Education in the Soviet Union and its Successor States*, London 2010, 223–279.

30 Lawrence, »Afterword«, 305–310, for an example from Indonesia, cf. Martin van Bruinessen, »Najmuddin al-Kubra, Jumadil Kubra and Jamaluddin al-Akbar. Traces of Kubrawiyya Influence in Early Indonesian Islam«, *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 150:2 (1994), 305–329.

faith-related questions are discussed, major epistemological problems can arise between believers and unbelievers when attempting to communicate.<sup>31</sup>

One example of how such different traditions and current positionings inform scholarship are the discussions about global and transnational history, a field quite en vogue in countries such as the US, Britain or Germany, but with significant contributions from India and Japan. Notable by their absence in debates on global history are historians from much of Southeast and Central Asia, the Middle East (with the exception of historians of the Ottoman Empire) and Africa. The picture becomes clearer once we notice that the current interest in global history (in the widest sense) can be linked in many ways to the wave of globalisation which set in with the fall of the Berlin wall and which affected some countries far more deeply than others. Furthermore, in countries such as China and India, which are new economic world powers, »globalisation« in its present and past forms attracts more attention than in regions which feel marginalised or even harmed by recent developments, and which henceforth have other issues high on their agendas.

Thus, apart from more institutional issues such as the academic system, which obviously influences to what extent different academics have access to and can partake and set the terms in international debates, academics from some countries may have significantly greater stakes in participating in debates about a new imperial or postcolonial history, in the history of entanglements and »global moments« than those from other regions. By contrast, many Arab historians are far more enmeshed in issues of nation-building and rebuilding, and preoccupied with regional issues such as the question of Israel/Palestine, which is reflected in the historiography. Obviously, there are studies of issues such as the spread of Islam, but as the perspective is usually one which is not very concerned with issues of interactions in a wider setting, and as the dominant global history is anyhow usually more concerned with more modern issues, these studies do not really engage with global history but move within their own discursive framework. Clearly, issues of institutional and research funding as much as different academic cultures and academic freedom or lack thereof contribute much to such wider trends, even if these topics cannot be discussed here in any great depth.

One caveat is, of course, obvious: The position of scholars within one or the other tradition is becoming increasingly difficult with the increasing globalisation of scholarship. Anthropologists, who

used to distinguish the »native« anthropologist, who was seen as a cultural insider, from the outsider based typically somewhere in »the West« have for some time reflected these issues.<sup>32</sup>

### *Languages of scholarship*

Another issue regarding the internationalisation of scholarship has to do with translation, both of concepts chosen to explain social phenomena, as well as with the choice of language in general.<sup>33</sup> Given the aforementioned function of social sciences and humanities in different national (and other) contexts, it is unsurprising that many publications are written in the national languages. Communication across the languages depends either on the choice of English as the language of publication, on wide-ranging translations or on good knowledge of a range of foreign languages.<sup>34</sup> In each case, processes of translation are required, which may or may not render comprehensible the concepts employed by the authors.<sup>35</sup> This can be observed even in discussions between British, French and German scholars, for example, i.e. between countries and scholars who are relatively close in geographical and cultural terms and have a long history of academic exchange and cooperation. It might also involve the different usages which English, French or Portuguese have taken on in various parts of the former European Empires, a fact which has been acknowledged by linguists more than by social scientists.<sup>36</sup>

The problem increases exponentially and poses major epistemological and linguistic questions if such processes involve scholars from very differ-

**32** Kirin Narayan, »How Native is a »Native« Anthropologist?« *American Anthropologist* 95 (1993), 671–686; Lange, »Zurückholen, was uns gehört.«, 23–25, 28–34. Cf. Soraya Altorki, Camillia F. El-Solh (eds.), *Arab Women in the Field. Studying your own society*, New York 1988, Seteney Shami, Linda Herrera (eds.), *Between Field and Text: Emerging Voices in Egyptian Social Science*, (Cairo Papers in Social Science 22:2), Cairo 1999.

**33** For a recent summary of the discussions about cultural translation, see Heike Liebau, »Alle Dinge, die zu wissen nötig sind.« Religiös-soziale Übersetzungsprozesse im kolonialen Indien«, *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 38:2 (2012), 243–271, cf. Monica Juneja, Margrit Pernau, »Lost in Translation? Transcending Boundaries in Comparative History«, in Heinz-Gerhard Haupt, Jürgen Kocka (eds.), *Comparative and Transnational History. Central European Approaches and New Perspectives*, New York 2009, 105–132.

**34** On the problems of relying exclusively on English as an academic language, cf. Bettina Mittelstraß, »Englisch ist nicht alles. Mehrsprachigkeit in den Wissenschaften«, *DAAD-magazin.de* 23.9.2009, <http://www.daad-magazin.de/11661/print.html> (accessed 20.3.2012), Leonie Loreck, »Mehrsprachigkeit ist das Ideal. Die Macht der Sprache«, *DAAD-magazin.de* 19.6.2007 (accessed 20.3.2012).

**35** For a position from cognitive anthropology affirming the possibility of such translations, see Cristina Toren, »Comparison and ontogeny«, in Gingrich, Fox, *Anthropology, by Comparison*, 187–203.

**36** Kane, *Intellectuels non europhones*, 59.

**31** Leonhard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism: A Critique of Development Ideologies*, Chicago, London 1988, 125f.

ent cultural and linguistic backgrounds, where concepts of social organisation, for example, may differ widely and warrant explanation, and etic categories might be needed in order to translate different emic meanings.<sup>37</sup>

To what extent the use of etic terms and concepts to describe and analyse phenomena is legitimate remains a matter of debate. Given that I have argued above that attention to both context and comparison is crucial to overcome the temptation to essentialise, I would argue that such terms and concepts remain necessary in order to communicate cross-culturally and to enable comparisons. However, this requires explicit reflection about the meanings associated with these etic terms in order to allow readers across a variety of backgrounds to situate the emergent analyses and to avoid the simple transposition of Western concepts, taken to be objective and universal, onto a variety of different contexts.<sup>38</sup> This should, however, be distinguished from the simple imposition of models, which is to be avoided. One successful example of how this could be done might be the reflections which, based on the work of Talal Asad, have developed about the appropriateness of the use of the term »secular« on Muslim societies which were not influenced by the separation (and opposition) of »secular« and »religious« in the way it had occurred in the tradition of the Western enlightenment.<sup>39</sup>

Returning to the wider language question, it should be noted that it is also intricately linked with that of publications as the visible output of scholars. This pertains both to the accessibility of scholarship across national boundaries and to the recognition of works in non-hegemonic languages. Obviously, the availability of resources for access, but also for translation proves a major obstacle.

However, unless a far wider variety of languages becomes recognised as legitimate idioms of scholarship, and read internationally, this will not really be sufficient. For example, as long as an American publication in English is recognised to be international, while one from Baku in Russian and published in Moscow is considered to be more or less local, matters remain lopsided. In addition, there is the not always unfounded fear that outside scholars may mine local publications and

publish material and ideas without due acknowledgement of local researchers which are treated as informants rather than colleagues.<sup>40</sup> Obviously, there is the added problem of the academic standards which differ greatly between countries and regions, and which also needs to be taken into account, but the still wide-spread refusal to even consider the equivalence of publications in certain non-Western languages will need to be reconsidered if we are to speak of a true internationalisation of scholarship. What is needed is a good mix of publications in local languages – not least to satisfy the necessity of publishing knowledge for the local audience – and in English.

### *Researching together*

Intensive collaboration between researchers of different origins and traditions has been celebrated variously as either the »internationalisation of academia« or, if this has been less successful than in the furthering of collaboration between scholars of broadly Western academic background, as a more or less heroic and ethically imperative effort of »conducting research with« scholars of the regions under investigation.<sup>41</sup> This is certainly an important impulse, notably if it surpasses the well established practice of relying on local »informants«, research assistants and colleagues for access to »the field« (regardless of whether this field is the classical anthropological field, an archival collection or a set of difficult manuscripts). Rather, it is necessary to attempt a basis for serious collaboration and exchange on a more equal footing which involves serious academic collaboration. Whether this is possible at all, however, given the aforementioned difficulties underlying scholarly endeavours, and, if so, under which circumstances, remains a matter of debate which is often glossed over.

If such attempts are meant seriously, what does this mean for the type of constellations outlined above? Certainly, an easy harmonisation of epistemological problems is unrealistic, but the reflexive approach to the difficulties encountered and the underlying problems involved may already help in the effort of translation and cooperation.<sup>42</sup> Looking back at the experience of such collaborative endeavours at Zentrum Moderner Orient, which have been a key element of its work, there are no easy conclusions to be drawn. Rather, a number of pragmatic factors could be mentioned which cer-

37 Thomas N. Headland, »A Dialogue Between Kenneth Pike and Marvin Harris on Emics and Etics« in Thomas N. Headland, Kenneth L. Pike, Marvin Harris (eds.), *Emics and Etics: The Insider/Outsider Debate*, Sage Publications 1990, <http://www.sil.org/~headlandt/ee-intro.htm> (25.8.2011).

38 This tension is discussed, for example, in Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, Kane, *Intellectuels non européens*, 53.

39 Carl W. Ernst, Richard C. Martin, »Introduction«, in Id. (eds.), *Rethinking Islamic Studies*, 1–19, Samira Haj, *Reconfiguring Islamic Traditions: Reform, Rationality, and Modernity*, Stanford 2009, e.g. 18f.

40 Amsler, *The Politics of Knowledge*, x.

41 This strong moral and ethical impulse is evident in Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, »Collaborative Anthropology as Twenty-first-Century Ethical Anthropology«, *Collaborative Anthropologies* 1 (2008), 175–182, cf. Luke Eric Lassiter, »Editor's Introduction«, *ibid.*, vii–xii. See also Ulrike Freitag, »Cosmopolitanism in the Middle East as part of global history«, *ZMO Programmatic Texts* No. 4 (2010).

42 Beck, »Cosmopolitical Realism«, 153f.



tainly facilitate interactions, without promising easy solutions. Prime among these is the factor of time – not just time for research, discussion and reflection, but time to acquaint oneself with different approaches, concepts and ways of working. While an added level of reflection is indispensable, the use of multiple languages in research and publications is another step towards an exchange which thematises differences but does not attempt to ignore them. In the end, the development of mutual trust and respect is probably the key to the evolution of common understandings, and thus as much dependent on the individual researchers as on the conditions within which they collaborate.

### **Interdisciplinary and interregional approaches: chances and pitfalls**

Interdisciplinarity has for long been a major demand in the humanities and social sciences. This was partly in order to break out of the mold of disciplines which were seen as too rigid to be able to accommodate the rapidly changing world and thus unable to grapple with new realities.<sup>43</sup> The debate has been conducted in various disciplines and with various directions. Thus, in the case of Islamic Studies, both the limitations of a philological approach, on the one hand, and a (non-philological) social science approach have been criticised for their limitations, although a »solid training in the languages, texts, and history of premodern Islam« is usually still considered to be a *sine qua non*.<sup>44</sup> This has, however, not only met with some resistance, it has, perhaps more importantly, given rise to an unease and the feeling of loss of orientation. Which kinds of questions should or could be legitimately asked? How is the relationship between social sciences and philology? Should students and researchers simply mine existing disciplines for concepts and methods and engage in a happy eclecticism? Given that the field of Islamic Studies, similar to many area studies, has long been accused of methodological underdevelopment in comparison to the »disciplines«, such concerns carry a heavy weight.<sup>45</sup>

The debate extends far beyond Islamic or area studies, it has indeed reached core disciplines of the humanities such as history and literature. Using the example of African philosophy, Kresse has made a compelling argument about the urgent need to be aware of the multiple linguistic, social, religious, cultural and political contexts in which philosophical thinking takes place. Only by so do-

ing, argues Kresse, can we truly understand the genuine development of specific traditions. This, he argues, is necessary to understand philosophical thought anywhere, except that we may be so familiar with Western developments that we can do so intuitively, rather than explicitly. And, he adds, in order to do so, we need the input of a variety of disciplines beyond philosophy, such as the social sciences and humanities.<sup>46</sup> However, practitioners of disciplines have started to be concerned about their disciplinary identity and fear the loss of academic substance.<sup>47</sup>

It may actually be helpful to distinguish between teaching and disciplinary training, on the one hand, and between larger research projects which are approaching specific problems and questions, on the other. While, in the first context, a certain core (which may be regularly adapted and restructured) of methods and a certain canon seem crucial in order to provide a solid academic grounding, cooperation between academics from different backgrounds may prove to be crucial in such research frameworks.<sup>48</sup> However, interdisciplinary frameworks demand a higher level of reflection and exchange about the methods employed to answer certain questions, and, perhaps more importantly, about terminology than disciplinary cooperation – unless, of course, we are considering interdisciplinarity as a mere addition of different disciplinary works on one subject.<sup>49</sup> This can prove disorienting notably for younger researchers who are involved in such larger research projects. In addition, the disciplinary embeddedness of university theses which such scholars might need to produce needs to be kept in mind, given that there have been a number of cases where theses were criticised for their interdisciplinarity. In addition, interdisciplinary work can prove to be both an asset and an obstacle to further career: A number of scholars have found it difficult to find university positions not for lack of qualification but rather because they did not fit easily into disciplinary jackets or fashions. Thus, empirically working economists have been judged not contribute sufficiently to abstract theory development, historians might be too narrow by »only« working on a non-Western

<sup>43</sup> This is one of the main arguments of Wolfgang Frühwald, Hans R. Jauß, Reinhart Koselleck, *Geisteswissenschaften heute*, 2nd ed. Frankfurt 1996.

<sup>44</sup> Ernst & Martin, »Introduction«, 13.

<sup>45</sup> This is reflected in many of the contributions in Abbas Poya, Maurus Reinkowski (eds.), *Das Unbehagen in der Islamwissenschaft*, Bielefeld 2008, with further references.

<sup>46</sup> Kai Kresse, »Auf dem Weg zu mehr Interdisziplinarität und Zusammenarbeit bei der Erforschung der philosophischen Traditionen in Afrika«, *Polylog* 25 (2011), 115–131.

<sup>47</sup> Peter-André Alt, »Oberflächliche Augenwischerei«, *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 21.12.2010 ([www.sueddeutsche.de/karriere/interdisziplinaere-forschung-oberflaechliche-augenwischerei-1.1038630](http://www.sueddeutsche.de/karriere/interdisziplinaere-forschung-oberflaechliche-augenwischerei-1.1038630)).

<sup>48</sup> Ulrich Herbert, »Interdisziplinarität als Mode und Methode«, *FRIAS News* 04 (2011), 8–11.

<sup>49</sup> On the conditions of successful interdisciplinary work, see Peter Weingart, »Interdisziplinarität – Zwischen wissenschaftspolitischer Modefloskel und pragmatischem Förderkonzept«, in Volkswagenstiftung (ed.), *Impulse geben – Wissen stiften. 40 Jahre Volkswagenstiftung*, Göttingen 2002, 159–195, here 173–177.

region (not a reproach commonly heard for those concentrating on German history) etc.<sup>50</sup> Another, related issue for researchers in all stages of their career might be research funding and publication, as many grant-giving bodies and journals are still very much discipline-oriented and peer reviewers often do not take kindly to interdisciplinarity.

An example for such interdisciplinary reflection may be the much-used term »agency«, once considered from the vantage point of such different disciplines as psychology, economics or politics.<sup>51</sup> The aim of such reflection does not necessarily need to be a merging or homogenisation of approaches or methods into a new transdisciplinarity.<sup>52</sup> This notwithstanding, intense debates – in the case of the study of »Muslim Worlds« mainly between different disciplines in the humanities and social sciences – can result in new insights within and notably on the edges of the respective disciplines.<sup>53</sup>

Debates between historians and anthropologists of different regional expertises have proven to be particularly fruitful in research on »Muslim Worlds«. While this does not and cannot lead to an easy harmonisation, a joint reflection on the relative role and importance of history and contemporary developments, as well as an exchange about what are considered to be major topics in both disciplines have proven very fruitful and led to a significant widening of perspectives. Similarly, a reflection on the different methodological assumptions has proven immensely productive.<sup>54</sup> Work across regions – necessary if »Muslims Worlds« as outlined above are to be taken seriously as an object of enquiry – can also be fraught with difficulties. In the case of the Indian subcontinent, for example, there exists long history of division between those dealing with »Muslim India« and those working on

Hindu history, literature etc. The essentialisation of this religiously deterministic perspective, dating back to the colonial perspective, has also led to what Metcalf has termed »too little« to understand the complexities of Indian social formations.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, and even within one discipline, the history (or anthropology) of different areas can have developed quite different approaches.<sup>56</sup> Thus, certainly Middle Eastern history, but to some extent also its anthropology are more text-based and philological than African history or anthropology, where oral history (and missionary as well as colonial archives) constitutes an important source. In the case of India, subaltern history, often researched in colonial archives, has developed as a major approach, and caste as a major category of investigation (in contrast, for example, to tribe or family in the Middle East and Africa). In different but not dissimilar ways, a dialogue between disciplines and scholars working more inductively, and others approaching their topics deductively, as well as one between those relying on quantitative and those working with qualitative data is urgently needed instead of the currently common mutual scepticism and at times outright rejection. If extended beyond area studies, where such dialogues are often practiced, this might have consequences for what are accepted disciplinary practices in fields such as economy or political science. However fruitful interdisciplinarity can be, it does depend, as Haller has pointed out, on common research interests and a basic understanding between researchers. Thus, it is a useful exercise in trying to understand the larger »whole«, however, it should not be made a requirement in all research projects.<sup>57</sup>

And, as mentioned earlier, national traditions might come in strongly even in the study of one historical empire. A case in point is Ottoman history. Historians of the Empire often deal only with the Balkans, the territories of present-day Turkey (i.e. mostly Anatolia) and/or the central administration, or the Arab provinces, and to focus on the respective archives. Linguistic as well as modern national boundaries thus seem to have created frontiers between researchers of one and the same Empire, which has often barred from view phenomena common to these different regions.

**50** Experiences at ZMO, cf. Simone Lässig, »Theoria com praxi. Das Georg-Eckert-Institut und sein Konzept anwendungsorientierter Forschung«, in Eckert, *Das Bulletin* 09 (2011), 2–6, here 4f.

**51** Laura M. Ahearn, »Language and Agency«, *Annual Review of Anthropology* 30 (2001), 109–137, Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*, Oxford 2005, 62–86, Walter Ötsch, »Ökonomische Akteure. Kulturhistorische Beispiele zum Wandel von Subjekt-Konzepten«, in Walter Ötsch, Stephan Panther (eds.), *Politische Ökonomie als Spezialwissenschaften*, Marburg 2002 and Alexej Leontjew, »Der allgemeine Tätigkeitsbegriff«, in Alexej A. Leontjew et. al., *Grundfragen einer Theorie der sprachlichen Tätigkeit*, Stuttgart 1984, 13–30.

**52** On transdisciplinarity, see Werner Arber (ed.), *Inter- und Transdisziplinarität. Warum? – Wie?*, Bern, Stuttgart, Wien 1993 and Martin Scheringer, »Transdisziplinarität – Leitbild oder Leerformel?«, *GAIA* 5:3–4 (1996), 126–128, Hansjörg Büchi, »Das Paradoxe mit der Transdisziplinarität« and Scheringer's »Replik«, *GAIA* 5:5, 205–208.

**53** On this Weingart, »Interdisziplinarität«, 177.

**54** An interesting reflection regarding the approach to sources is Kunal Parker, »Thinking inside the Box. A Historian among the Anthropologists«, *Law & Society Review* 38:4 (2004), 851–860.

**55** Barbara Metcalf, »Presidential Address: Too Little and Too Much: Reflections on Muslims in the History of India Author(s)«, *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 54:4 (1995), 951–967, here 956.

**56** The following is based on Richard Fardon, »Localizing Strategies: The Regionalization of Ethnographic Accounts«, in Richard Fardon (ed.), *Localizing Strategies. Regional Traditions of Ethnographic Writing*, Edinburgh, Washington 1990, 1–35, notably 21–29 and nine years of participant observation, so to speak, in the History Department of the School of Oriental and African Studies.

**57** Dieter Haller, »Kommentar zum Beitrag von Birgitt Röttger-Rössler«, *Sociologus* 61:1, 123–126.


## Conclusion

This paper has shown some of the epistemological, theoretical, methodological and, last but not least, practical problems involved in what, at first sight, seems to be a fairly straightforward research agenda. It has hinted at some of the ways in which a consciously self-reflexive, dialogical approach combining methods used by different disciplines and integrating researchers of different backgrounds might help to overcome some of the traditional obstacles in the study of the different worlds Muslims inhabit. This does not suggest that widened in such ways, the study of »Muslim Worlds« is a finite enterprise. As any empirical field, it will keep evolving, as will the sources we can use to explore the different questions which different scholars will ask.

Furthermore, it is crucial that this task is not carried out in isolation. While empirical work on different questions pertaining to »Muslim Worlds« might, in itself, already widen the horizon, it is

necessary to keep a comparative view on developments elsewhere in order to avoid a new essentialisation. The tension between the application of seemingly categories and the supposedly specific regional or local experiences, both within this particular field of enquiry and in its relation to other comparable fields, can probably not be entirely resolved. However, regular reflections about the possibilities and limits of comparisons, and a serious attempt to push the history of concepts beyond the Western context, will hopefully in the long term sharpen our perception of what may be specific to some or all Muslim contexts, and what are universal phenomena.

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We welcome academic comments. Please see a first by Professor Dr. Birgit Meyer, Utrecht University. 

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ISSN 2191-3242

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